

***Searching the Shadows***  
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Karen Nowicki and Kate Sloan

**Karen Nowicki**

Shadow work, as the name suggests, involves delving into the shadows, the innermost regions of our psyche—the deep, dark places that stem from our history and the stories we tell ourselves based on our past experiences. Sometimes these stories provide a protective coat, but at times, they entrap us in patterns that are both familiar and unhealthy. Shadow work requires that we dig deep, exploring our inner landscape through methods such as journaling, therapy, meditation, or any practice that allows for quiet reflection on our behaviors and decisions, thus guiding us towards our "Ultimate You," as Sarah Sabora beautifully terms it in her book *Soul Archeology*.

As I read Sabora's book and contemplated its wisdom, I found myself resonating deeply with her struggle to navigate unfulfilling and unhealthy relationships, rooted in patterns shaped by her parents' divorce during her childhood. I realized that I too carry patterns from my upbringing, stemming from my parents' challenges in navigating their emotions and understanding how to raise children. Their struggles were influenced by their own upbringing, creating a cycle of emotional distance and communication barriers that resulted in me not truly understanding or appreciating their love for me until I was an adult. My parents didn't have the greatest role models in my grandparents, so they tried their hardest and yet sometimes as a child it wasn't what I needed at the time.

Our childhood experiences, family dynamics, and societal conditioning contribute to the formation of these shadows. For me, growing up in an environment where emotional expression was challenging, I internalized the belief that emotions were to be restrained or hidden. This belief became a part of my shadow, influencing how I navigated relationships and dealt with stress. As an adult, these patterns manifested in two main ways—what I like to call adult restraint collapse and attempts to control the inside by controlling the outside.

Restraint collapse is a phenomenon often seen in children after a full day of school, resulting in an emotional or physical collapse. I noticed that I experienced a similar collapse after stressful days. My inner teenager emerges, seeking refuge in activities like zoning out in front of the TV or my phone, attempting to numb the overstimulated or stressed feelings that accumulated from the constant barrage of the day. This often results in me not doing what I have to do, or more often, me not going to sleep on time in preparation for my 5:15 am alarm.

The other manifestation, trying to control external circumstances, became another way for me to cope with my underlying anxiety and lack of emotional expression. Even seemingly mundane aspects, like how to load the dishwasher, became a battleground for control. These attempts were efforts to manifest inner calmness by controlling external scenarios, a desperate bid to manage the anxiety within.

Neither of these actions helped me do the things I needed to do, or the things I've wanted to do, or sometimes the things that are good for me. They were the unhelpful patterns I've developed over the years in response to my experiences that kept me comfortable. As I explored Sabora's book, I realized that these patterns were a result of my inability to express my feelings and the ingrained belief in the value of productivity over breaks and self-care. Shadow work invites us to peel back

these layers of patterns, to understand their origins, and to assess whether they serve our higher selves or not.

Shadow work is about shining a compassionate light on these relics of our experiences, understanding their origins, and challenging the narratives that no longer serve us. It is about unearthing our coping mechanisms, identifying patterns that hold us back, and transforming them into tools for growth and healing. Each layer we peel back reveals a part of ourselves that has been waiting to be acknowledged and embraced.

The process of shadow work is much like excavating coprolite, or fossilized feces—a process that goes layer by layer, revealing rough and raw aspects of ourselves. This journey is ongoing, and though it may never be fully completed, each layer uncovered grants us greater understanding and compassion for ourselves. It is a courageous journey of continuous self-discovery and self-love, requiring the courage to bring forth a metaphorical flashlight to illuminate the depths of our being. Sabora beautifully encapsulates the interconnected dance of our darkness and lightness. Our shadows are an integral part of this intricate dance; they are the hidden corners within us that have been held captive by shame, guilt, or longing. To embrace our truest selves, we must bravely confront and heal these wounds, freeing ourselves from the chains that shackle our self-love and authenticity.

As part of this excavation Sabora recommends creating a self-love to-do list. What activities feed your ultimate you? While reading her book, I also began rethinking my values and what I view as important in my life. Being able to crystallize my values allowed me to be clear about what serves my Ultimate Self and what doesn't. I realized that my three core values are connection to myself and others, vitality, and joy. When faced with choices, I now have a clear compass to guide me and a road map to keep me from making some of the same, old, unhelpful choices. Now I understand the role my morning and end of workday rituals have in my life and why they help me. I have a clear grasp on how nature walks touch each of these values and fulfill me in ways that other pursuits do not. Without taking the time to truly examine the shadows, I wouldn't have come to these realizations and may continue to flounder, doing things I "should" even if they aren't right for me.

Shadow work is an ongoing excavation, an archeological expedition into our own souls. It is a courageous exploration into the layers of our past, our experiences, and the narratives that have shaped us. Like an archeologist meticulously digging through ancient ruins, we uncover the layers of our being, exposing buried treasures and healing wounds.

### **Kate Sloan**

Karen just beautifully explained what shadow work is and some of the methods we can use to explore our shadows. I'm going to tell you why we should do that.

Delving into your shadow, doing that work, excavating all of those old memories, all of that old pain – I mean, come on, why would anybody do that?

Have you ever flipped out on someone for no explicable reason? Do you really not like someone but you can't explain why? Are there things you want to do, but for some reason just can't? Do you feel like there's something blocking you from moving past difficult events in your life? Do you sometimes feel like you have no idea who you really are? What *is* that? The answer, my friends, isn't blowing in the wind. The answer lies in the shadows.

Carl Jung was the first to explore the shadow side of self. As Gary Bobroff in his book on the Swiss psychotherapist succinctly explains Jung's idea: *Our shadow is the pain we've forgotten about. It is a complex within us, a split-off part of our consciousness loaded with emotional weight. Our persona is what we most want to be seen to be; shadow is what we least want to be.*

The shadow is the darkness we refuse to acknowledge in ourselves. That sounds pretty ominous, doesn't it? The thing about your shadow is that it is a part of you. You know it's there, but you've conveniently decided to ignore it. Nothing in that darkness is a surprise. You've lived with it. You've filled that shadow yourself, bit by bit.

Grief? Into the shadow. Jealousy? Guilt? Fear? Anger? Betrayal? Hatred? Toss them in, too. All of the things we don't want to feel, those things that we're not proud of, those are the things that live in your shadow.

Usually, it just sits there, in the back of your mind, like a sleeping dragon just waiting to spew some fire out at what *it* considers an appropriate time, but which for you is the absolute *most inappropriate* time. It's those inexplicable flashes of rage. It's the immediate dislike of someone. It's a coldness you feel in your heart when you know you should have compassion. It's the vicious word that slips out of your mouth that shames you and shocks you all at once. We all have a shadow. Jung says: "Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is."

Who the hell would want to dig that out of their subconscious? Isn't it better left alone? Ah, yeah, not really. Let me give you an example from my own life.

My niece died on Groundhog Day this year. Since then, I have seen nothing *but* shadow. You see, Steph was the closest thing I will ever have to a daughter and hers was a death that hit me harder than any other I've experienced. I've been a shell of a human since then. But no one other than my closest friends & family has had an inkling of that. Why? Because I threw it in my shadow and slammed the door shut. It's been nearly nine months and I have yet to shed a tear. Oh, I tear up, but have I allowed the pain, the grief, or the bloody-minded rage I feel deep in my soul to come out? Oh hell, no.

Why? Because the pain is so huge that I am afraid it's going to consume me. I feel like if I start crying I will never stop. And of course, I know how difficult it is for people to see grief, so to be acceptable in the company of others, I hide it. My shadow isn't healthy. But, damn, it is strong.

My grief was born on September 12, 1960. That was the day my mother sat me & my brother Tim down and told us that "Daddy has gone to the angels." My very direct, less than spiritual brother, at age four said "You mean he's dead?" Tim's always been reason & science-oriented, the family atheist, Goddess bless him. I've been afraid of the power of grief since then.

On November 27, 1989, I lost the other half of my soul, my best friend Michael, to the scourge of AIDS. It took me about three years before I felt anywhere close to human, much less myself. And on March 23, 1999, my mother died of complications from COPD & geriatric onset anorexia. After being unable to face cleaning out my mother's house in order to sell it, I went into therapy. My therapist & I worked hard just to get me away from the guilt of the childhood trauma that bubbled up from her death. The rest of the fear & grief & anger went back into the shadows. When Steph, just weeks before her 48<sup>th</sup> birthday, died from a merciless kidney cancer that spread everywhere in her body, I couldn't acknowledge my grief. All I felt was pure rage. From grief, to numbness, to paralysis, to rage.

I tell you all this so you can see the threads that connect one event to the other; how the shadow feeds on one pain after another, how repressed emotions grow and fester, unacknowledged, in the darkness. I can see those threads now. It's been months of journaling, but I'm moving toward that light. But oh, that shadow is strong. I've been tossing repressed emotions in there for a very, very long time.

I am not alone. We all have shadows that are filled with blocked emotions. For me and many others, it's grief. For others it's childhood trauma, or divorce, or other events that have knocked their lives off their chosen path. Most of us have multiple hidden wounds buried in that darkness. I'm not going to lie. Shadow work is tough. It hurts to accept the festering shadows in yourself, the horrible things you've thought & done, the awful feelings that bubble up, the terrors that have been inflicted on you. It's so much easier to just let the nasty sleeping dragon lie. But that dragon grows. It loves the dark. It will take all of those emotions, that shame, that pain we don't want to feel and feed on it. The more we toss those emotions into the shadow, the fatter that dragon (or in Jung's words, that devil) gets.

Jung again: *By not being aware of having a shadow, you declare a part of your personality to be non-existent. Then it enters the kingdom of the non-existent, which swells up and takes on enormous proportions...If you get rid of qualities you don't like by denying them, you become more and more unaware of what you are, you declare yourself more and more non-existent, and your devils will grow fatter and fatter.*

As painful as it is, our dragons need to be recognized and brought into the light. In telling you this, I may have given you the wrong idea, like there is something deep, dark & unknown lurking in your personality and dear God, where the hell do you start uncovering that? It's not unknown, really. It's ignored. There's a difference. You have put each & every emotion, each & every hurt or trauma into that shadow. They are all yours. There is nothing in your shadow that you have not put there yourself. And therefore, there is nothing in that darkness that you haven't already seen, felt, or lived through. And there is nothing in that shadow that you can't face. But that doesn't mean it's easy. It isn't, but it's worth it to truly know who we are, *all* the pieces of us, good and bad. To grow the light inside of us, we need to accept our darkness. Neither dark nor light can exist without the other.

It's a life-long process, this getting to know ourselves, to becoming the people we want to be (or wish we were already.) Compassion begins when we learn we are not alone, that the shadow that lurks in us has a companion in others, that no one is wholly pure & good. But the darkness, that shadow, does not need to overtake us. Jung also said: "Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart ... Who looks outside, dreams, who looks inside, awakens." Let us awaken. In this season of shadows and mystery, let us have the courage to look into our own darkness. May we be fearless, and may we be compassionate to ourselves and to others as we do the work.

The ritual I do each year for Samhain – Halloween – is to celebrate the turning of the wheel of the year. Samhain is the Celtic New Year and I start my ritual with black candles lit on my altar. I look back at what happened in the last year, usually the things I feel I screwed up, and as I do, I extinguish each of the black candles, acknowledging my faults, my sorrows, pain I inflicted and pain I felt, and forgiving myself for them (if I can – some years are easier than others. This year is going to be a doozy.) I then think of the good things I wish to bring more of into my life. Sometimes I list all of the people I love and am thankful for (and believe me, y'all have been on

that list for over ten years now), and in joy & hope I light white candles. It's my way of acknowledging my shadow, but also rejoicing in my own light.

We are all a work in progress and there is no shame in that. But know this, the more we can rid ourselves of bits of our shadow, the more room we can make for love – love for ourselves, love for each other and love for our world. And *that* makes it all worth it.  
Blessed be.

### Sources

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[Carl Jung: 18 Most Insightful Shadow Work Quotes - Free Spirit Journal \(thefreespiritjournal.com\)](http://thefreespiritjournal.com)

[39 Carl Jung Shadow Quotes — Niche Quotes](#)